

Full Representation Electoral Systems: Reforming Multiseat Bodies

Choice Voting - Voters rank (1st choice, 2nd choice, etc.) as many candidates as they wish. Candidates win by reaching a "victory threshold" of 1st-choice votes roughly equal to the number of votes divided by the number of seats. Ballots are counted for next-choice candidates if a higher choice loses. These rankings facilitate coalition-building and participation. Used to elect the city council in Cambridge (MA), Choice voting is also called "single transferable vote" and "preference voting."

Cumulative Voting - Voters cast as many votes as there are seats, but are not limited to giving a candidate one vote. Instead, they can concentrate their votes on one or more candidates. Winning candidates are determined by a simple plurality of votes cast. Cumulative voting is used in Peoria (IL), Chilton County (AL) and more than fifty Texas localities, including Amarillo. It was used to elect the Illinois state assembly from 1870 to 1980.

Limited Voting - Voters may only cast fewer votes than the number of seats, or parties are required to nominate fewer candidates than there are seats. Winners are determined by totaling all votes cast. The greater the difference between the number of votes and the number of seats, the greater the opportunities for fair representation. Limited voting has been adopted recently in several North Carolina and Alabama localities and for decades has been used in many northeastern municipalities.

Electing Single-Seats through Instant Runoff Voting – Like choice voting, but only one candidate wins. Voters rank as many candidates as they wish (1, 2, 3 and so on). The candidate with the fewest first-choice votes loses. Ballots from this candidate are counted for the next choice indicated on each ballot. This process continues until one candidate has a majority. San Francisco uses IRV, and it is approved or under consideration in numerous other jurisdictions.

About FairVote-The Center for Voting and Democracy

We are dedicated to fair elections where every vote counts and all voters are represented. As a catalyst for reform, we conduct research, analysis, education and advocacy to build understanding of and support for more democratic voting systems.

FairVote's mission is founded on the belief that our voting systems can be reformed at all levels of government in order to increase vitality in our democracy, ensure fairer representation of our society's diversity in elected bodies, and assist local, state, and national governments in their efforts toward solving the issues facing our nation. For youths, this process can begin with reforming student government elections, and lobbying local officials.

FairVote has a comprehensive website and a wide array of public education materials, provides legal assistance in voting rights cases, and holds workshops in communities and at conferences around the country.

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Working for Full Representation

Youth and Student Political Empowerment



A project of

F A I R V O T E

The Center For Voting and Democracy

Reasons for Reform

Our nation's current winner-take-all systems leave few opportunities for both youth and minority voices to be heard. With these two formative segments of the population continually silenced at all levels of government, it is no wonder we continue to see diminishing turnout numbers that reflect a sense of frustration and disenchantment.

Although the minority population in the United States continues to increase, government representation at both the local, state, and federal level does not yet accurately reflect these changes. Many young adults and college students find little reason to use their vote since candidates traditionally do not court their vote. It is essential that we examine the system and electoral structures that create such a dilemma

There is an alternative. Through the use of **full representation** voting systems, young people on college campuses and minorities who reside in areas where their views are not the majority will be able to gain representation. Full representation increases competitiveness of races and expands the diversity and scope of the issues being brought to the table.

The principle of "full representation" voting systems—also called "proportional representation" - is a powerful one: the right of decision belongs to a majority, but the right of representation belongs to all. Proportional representation systems allow groupings of voters to elect a fair share of candidates. Gaining more than half of the popular vote wins a majority of the seats, but not all. One-fifth of the vote wins one in five seats rather than none. Proportional representation means representative democracy.

Voting Systems in Action

In Texas, **cumulative voting** is a reality. In 1999 with a population of more than 150,000 people, the Amarillo Independent School District became the nation's largest city to adopt cumulative voting. Amarillo, which, previously had no minority representation now has one African American and two Latina board members.

In Chilton County, Alabama, Bobby Agee in 1988 became the first African American elected to the Chilton County Commission even though blacks comprise only 12 percent of the population. Now serving his fourth term, his success is attributed to **cumulative voting** which was implemented the first year he was elected. Mr. Agee has been elected to chair the commission several times by his white colleagues. **Cumulative voting** was used to elect the Illinois State House of Representatives from 1870 to 1980. Harold Washington and Carol Moseley-Braun were elected to the state's house of representatives under this system. Governor George Ryan (R), Senate Minority Leader Emil Jones (D), and many others support its return.

In several Alabama areas, an increase in turnout and the success of women elected to city council and school boards are attributed to the implementation of **cumulative voting or limited voting** in those areas. In 1993, Jamesville, North Carolina elected two black commissioners for the first time in the town's history (two out of five.) This is in proportion to the 40 percent black population in Jamesville. Several localities along North Carolina's coastal plain use **limited voting**. Limited voting was used as a remedy which did not distort district lines or create judicial challenges to the redistricting process.

Cambridge, Massachusetts has used **choice voting** (also called the 'single transferable vote,' or 'preference voting') to elect city council members since 1941. Blacks comprise only 13 percent of the population in Cambridge but have had near-continuous representation on the city council and school committee for decades. New York City uses **choice voting** for local school board elections. Under this system there is significant representation of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. The Department of Justice refused to pre-clear a plan to modify the system because changing this election method might dilute minority voting strength. Cincinnati, Ohio, used **choice voting** from 1925-1957. Blacks served on ten of the fifteen councils elected during this period and a number of reforms in racial policies were initiated.

Either **instant runoff voting** or a form of **full representation** is used to elect student government leaders at many colleges and universities, some them are: The University of California at Berkeley, Carleton College (Northfield, MN), The California Institute of Technology, Cornell University, Harvard University, University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign), Johns Hopkins University, Lane Community College, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Metropolitan State University, University of Maryland (College Park), Stanford University, University of Washington, Whitman College.

Mobilizing Young People for Electoral Reform

Throughout our history, movements for better government, civil rights and real democracy have thrived off the efforts of young people. Every major social movement in this nation has included the energy of students and youths.

We believe the struggle for better representation and electoral systems that reflect society's diversity, has far reaching implications for how receptive our governmental bodies are to the concerns of youths.

Youth voter turnout efforts are important. But it is critical simultaneously to acknowledge that our current

winner-take-all electoral systems too often pre-determine the outcome of elections. This leaves young voters few choices and realistically only the ability to ratify or symbolically protest against the winners, usually known in advance of an election.

Through youth outreach and educational efforts, we hope to further the dialogue among young people in communities and on college campuses about the need for real electoral reform, later translating this into actual reforms to hold elected officials accountable and give us the power to make a real difference at the polls.